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ABSTRACT

Lesbian baiting, the attempt to control women's "unacceptable" behavior by labeling them as lesbians, is the intersection of two forms of oppression--sexism and homophobia. Sexism is the systematic subordination of women, based on the belief in the inherent superiority of men. Sexism has defined the roles that men and women fill in order to maintain male dominance. Lesbian baiting is an effective tool to maintain these roles because homophobia has made "lesbian" a negative, discrediting label. When women engage in activities that have traditionally been seen as masculine, such as outdoor and adventure education, they threaten the power dynamics of sexism. Baiting hurts lesbians because negative attitudes and behaviors toward lesbians are reinforced. Baiting hurts heterosexual women by reinforcing sexist stereotypes. Two examples demonstrate that in adventure and outdoor education, lesbian baiting prevents women from participating in activities that might be enjoyable and beneficial to them and limits the abilities of women's programs and organizations to get funding or other forms of support. "Defending" oneself by asserting one's heterosexuality, trying to appear more "feminine," and not challenging lesbian-baiting rumors are responses that reinforce lesbian baiting. Naming baiting for what it is, eliminating the fear of being labeled lesbian, working against homophobia and sexism in general, and educating oneself about how gender roles limit women are actions that combat lesbian baiting. Includes resources for further reading. Contains 17 references. (TD)

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Lesbian Baiting Hurts All Women

Mary McClintock

ED 412 049

- *Barb is active in the leadership of the Outing Club at her college. She's getting very tired of being "warned" about other women members of the club. Several friends have told Barb that "all those outdoor activities attract lesbians" and to make sure she doesn't share a tent with any of the lesbians.*
- *Lisa is worried that if any of her co-workers see her going to the Women in Experiential Education Professional Group (PG) meeting at the Association for Experiential Education Conference, they'll think she's a lesbian. She's heard some of her co-workers making jokes about what the lesbians in the group do during the women-only meetings.*
- *Clarice decides not to include her extensive volunteer leadership experience with Women Outdoors on her application for a job leading therapeutic outdoor programs for adolescents. Women Outdoors has a reputation as a lesbian organization in the community, and the local school board just made a policy excluding any programs that "support homosexuality" from being part of the school. Clarice knows that some of the school board members are also on the board of the youth service agency with the job opening.*

Barb, Lisa, and Clarice are all experiencing forms of lesbian baiting—labeling women or groups of women as lesbians in order to discredit them and to pressure them to conform to traditional gender roles. Lesbian baiting works because homophobia (the fear and hatred of lesbians and gay men) still exists.

Despite increasing acceptance of lesbians and gay men in some areas of society (including passing gay rights laws and domestic partnership benefits), homophobia is alive and well in many areas of education. The original version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed by the U.S. Senate in the summer of 1994 included an amendment by Senator Jesse Helms that would prohibit schools from receiving federal funds if the schools had any programs or curricula that had "the

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purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative" (Pitsch, 1994). While this amendment was removed in the final version of the Act, the fact that the amendment was approved by the Senate indicates the level of homophobia in public K-12 education. In December 1993, because of concern over increasing harassment and the high suicide rate among lesbian and gay youth, Massachusetts passed a law to protect the civil rights of lesbian and gay public school students and provide programs that support them (Portner, 1994). Some local communities have resisted implementation of these programs, stating that such programs "undermined family values" and "interfered with parents' rights to teach values in the home" (Portner, 1994). The debate in the federal legislature over the Helms amendment and the reaction of communities to attempts to address lesbian and gay issues in schools are just a few recent examples of homophobia prevalent in many areas of education.

One particular form of homophobia that remains prevalent in experiential education is lesbian baiting. While other forms of homophobia and gay baiting affect men, the focus of this chapter is on lesbian baiting and its impact on women. My goal in this chapter is to provide a framework for thinking, talking, and taking action about an issue which hurts all women in the fields of outdoor and adventure education. In all three of the situations described above, it doesn't matter whether Lisa, Clarice, or Barb are lesbians or if any of the women in the Women in Experiential Education PG, *Women Outdoors*, or the outing club are lesbians. What matters is that calling them lesbians or the fear of being called lesbians is causing women to monitor and change their actions in order to avoid being labeled.

Suzanne Pharr, in her pioneering book, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1988), defines lesbian baiting as follows:

> Lesbian baiting is an attempt to control women by labeling us as lesbians because our behavior is not acceptable, . . . lesbian baiting occurs when women are called lesbians because we resist male dominance and control. And it has little or nothing to do with one's sexual identity. (p. 19)

The key is that women are called lesbian because they have done something that appears to be "inappropriate" for women to do, such as excelling at outdoor activities, dressing in clothes that aren't considered feminine, or speaking up for issues that affect women's lives. Being called lesbian or the fear of being called lesbian is used as a tool to get women to change their behavior to more traditional female behavior in an attempt to avoid such labeling.

Lesbian baiting is the intersection of two forms of oppression—sexism and homophobia. Sexism is the systematic subordination of women by men, based on the belief in the inherent superiority of men. Sexism has defined the roles that men and women are supposed to fill in order to keep male dominance in place. Anything that threatens the maintenance of those roles threatens the sexist system. Such baiting is an effective tool to maintain traditional gender roles because the existence of

homophobia has made being labeled a lesbian a negative, discrediting action. If being considered a lesbian were not derogatory in the general culture, lesbian baiting would not hold the power that it does.

Lesbian baiting can happen in any situation where women step out of traditional gender roles, including in outdoor and adventure education. Throughout this chapter, I will follow the stories of two situations. The stories are conglomerates of experiences I and other women who work in outdoor and adventure education have had. All of the names have been changed.

Case #1

Louise works as an outdoor educator for an alternative high school, leading outdoor activities for the students at the school. While the students seem to enjoy the activities and to respond well to Louise's leadership, they seem puzzled by her. She is unlike any woman they know. She wears different clothes and likes to do lots of hard, physical activities such as backpacking and rock climbing. The students have asked Louise why she does these activities and why she doesn't dress more like the other women teachers, who often wear dresses and make-up. They also want to know if she has a boyfriend and, if so, what he thinks of her doing this outdoor stuff. Louise told them that the activities are fun and she wears clothes that allow her to do the activities she likes, rather than dressing for fashion. She does not respond to the questions about boyfriends.

One day, after a number of such conversations with her students, Louise started looking at her clothes and thinking that maybe she should wear dresses to work occasionally. She wondered if the students would respect her more if she did. The next week, when Louise walked out the door of the school toward her car to drive home, she noticed four of the girls of her outdoor activity group standing on the sidewalk across from the school. When they saw her, they started to chant, "Lezzie, Lezzie, Lezzie. . . ." They continued until she got in her car.

Case #2

Women's Outdoor Activities (WOA) is a non-profit organization that provides outdoor trips for women and girls. While WOA has been successful in the four years it has been in existence, the WOA Board of Directors is now seeking funding from the local community and from corporations to expand their programs for low-income women and girls.

At the last meeting, the WOA Board discussed recent failures to secure funding from several businesses. The representatives of the businesses said that there were rumors that WOA was really a lesbian organization out to recruit young girls by teaching them masculine outdoor skills, and that their businesses could not be associated with anything to do with lesbians because it would be bad for the company's image. Fran and Beth, the Board members who had approached these businesses, said they thought that the lesbian Board members should be less blatant about being lesbian and that possibly some of the girls' programs should focus on more traditional women's activities.

These two stories demonstrate how lesbian baiting happens both externally and internally on individual and group levels. In Louise's case, other people label her as a lesbian in an attempt to control her behavior—to make her act more like other

women in clothing and activity. Furthermore, Louise herself considers changing her behavior to be more typically feminine to avoid such labeling. In the case of WOA, the businesses withhold funding from WOA because of the perception that WOA is a lesbian organization and its involvement in nontraditionally female activities. Some of the Board members internal to WOA suggest changed behavior by lesbian members of the Board and changes in programs.

These stories share elements common to most lesbian baiting situations: an individual or group is labeled lesbian, or some code word for lesbian; a label that is intended to be discrediting or derogatory is used in an attempt to limit or control the behavior of the individual woman or group; and the labeling is based on rigid gender roles or stereotypes.

Lesbian baiting often occurs in more subtle, less overt ways than in these two examples. Rather than directly labeling a woman as a lesbian, questions might be asked about whether she has a husband or boyfriend, code words such as "Amazon" or "mannish" could be used to describe her, or insinuations and whisper campaigns could be started to describe her as being "that way." Sometimes, people don't have the words to describe what they sense, but they know that the woman or group in question is not acting the way women are "supposed" to act, and they equate stepping out of gender role with being other than heterosexual.

Why does lesbian baiting happen in outdoor and adventure education? There are a number of reasons, but the primary reason is that wilderness, the outdoors, and outdoor activities have traditionally been considered the territory of men. Outdoor activities have often been considered an arena for men to prove and exhibit their masculinity.

Joshua Miner and Joe Boldt, in their book, *Outward Bound USA* (1981), describe the concerns of Outward Bound staff when the formerly all-male organization was considering including female students and staff. Outward Bound was not only an all-male organization, but one that equated its activities with masculinity. Bob Pieh is quoted in *Outward Bound USA* as saying, "There was strong feeling at that time among those valuing and cultivating Outward Bound's machismo image that the success of women in similar experiences would diminish that image" (p. 161).

Along with the concerns that "women were not up to hard physical stress or to meeting traditionally male kinds of physical challenge" (p. 160), there were also concerns that being exposed to such programs could have a negative impact on the students and staff. Miner and Boldt describe this concern as "the 'Amazon syndrome'—a concern lest Outward Bound have a defeminizing influence on girl students, or attract 'Amazon types' to staff jobs" (p. 160). These concerns explicitly link the notion of women doing nontraditional activities with the assumption that such women would be "Amazons," which in this case and many others is a code word for lesbians.

The examples mentioned about Outward Bound describe incidents and attitudes in the 1960s. How is lesbian baiting played out in the 1990s for outdoorswomen?

Anne Dal Vera (1994), a member of the American Women's Trans-Antarctic Expedition (AWE), describes the homophobic reactions AWE received when fund raising for and publicizing their all-women's expedition to ski across Antarctica:

> This expedition never received corporate funding, although we approached over 250 corporations. . . . One corporate executive reportedly told Ann Bancroft (AWE expedition leader), "maybe . . . if you take a man along. . . . Other companies were fearful that if the women got hurt, it would be bad for their image. Some didn't want to sponsor a women's expedition because they assumed that all the team members were lesbians. A lot of suggestive remarks were made both directly and indirectly: Two women to a tent? Gonna keep each other warm? Such homophobic assumptions weren't made about Will Steger's 1990 all-male Antarctic Expedition, or the Reinhold Messner/Arved Fuchs ski traverse of Antarctica. (pp. 122-123)

The striking contrast between how this women's expedition and men's expeditions were treated by potential funders and the press speaks loudly of the continued existence of homophobia, sexism, and their by-product, lesbian baiting.

Women are often labeled as lesbians when they work in jobs that have been considered "men's jobs." Outdoor leadership has long been considered men's work. In his book, *Labeling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma and Social Control*, Edwin M. Schur describes the reaction of men to women entering traditionally "men's jobs" in the following way: "When male workers' conceptions of their 'masculinity' are closely linked to the nature and conditions of their work, they are especially likely to feel threatened by female job entrants" (p. 64). In these situations, Schur says that "more overt derogation may occur" (p. 64).

Similar dynamics occur in the area of athletics, another traditionally male domain. Women who excel in sports are also often labeled as lesbians. Helen Lenskyj (1987), in her article, "Female Sexuality and Women's Sport," addresses this dynamic in the following way:

> The issue of male power is central to the popular association between sport and lesbianism; regardless of sexual preference, women who reject the traditional feminine role in their careers as athletes, coaches or sport administrators, as in any other nontraditional pursuit, pose a threat to existing power between the sexes. For this reason, these women are the frequent targets of labels intended to devalue or dismiss their successes by calling their sexuality into question. (pp. 383-384)

When women engage in any activity that has traditionally been seen as masculine, such as outdoor and adventure education and athletics, they threaten the power dynamics of sexism. Lesbian baiting is used as a tool to attempt to get such women back into roles that support the status quo of sexism, that is, traditional female gender roles.

What are the Effects of Lesbian Baiting?

Case #1

By the time Louise got to her car, she was angry, sad, and afraid. It was clear that the students intended the chanting as derogatory. She didn't know what to think or do. How was she going to face the students the next day? What would she say to them? Did they really think she was a lesbian? Why? Because she was different? Clearly this indicated that the students viewed her difference with suspicion. She was also upset because she had seen one of the school administrators in the parking lot, and she knew he had heard what the girls were chanting. She knew that the Board of Directors of the agency that ran the school, and the community in general, was very politically conservative. She was worried that she might lose her job if the school administration and Board thought she was a lesbian.

Case #2

After the few moments of silence that met Fran and Beth's statement, several Board members started to speak at once. Eleanor expressed outrage that Fran and Beth thought WOA and its Board members should change how they behave to please some businesses. Martha said she was shocked and horrified to hear that WOA had such a "bad" reputation in the community. Claire said that she would quit the Board if she was expected to hide her lesbianism. Suzanne wanted to know if Fran and Beth thought that the lesbians on the Board were to blame for WOA not receiving funding. Instead of discussing fund raising as per the agenda, the Board spent the rest of the meeting discussing whether or how to respond to accusations and how to manage the image of the organization. By the end of the meeting, the only decision that was made was that they would stop seeking funding from businesses while they explored how to respond to the rumors. The tension between Board members was heightened. Lesbian members were upset by the animosity directed at them. Some of the heterosexual members defended their concerns that they would be perceived as lesbian. Progress in setting up the program for low-income women and girls was stopped, effectively keeping them from participating in WOA's activities.

In general, lesbian baiting has a number of effects, both on the individuals involved and on others. Individuals and groups that are targets of baiting, such as the women in these two cases, have to expend energy dealing with the baiting—talking about it, educating about it, or managing their image—rather than putting energy into meeting their own goals. Both Louise and WOA are being pressured to limit their actions to activities that are considered "feminine" and appropriate for women. Such pressure on some women reinforces the limits on all women's behavior. Lesbians are hurt whenever baiting occurs because negative attitudes and behaviors toward lesbians are reinforced. Heterosexual women are hurt because baiting reinforces stereotypes of what behavior is acceptable for heterosexual women.

In adventure and outdoor education, lesbian baiting causes women not to participate in activities that might be enjoyable and beneficial for them in order to avoid

being perceived as lesbians. It also limits the abilities of women's programs and organizations to get funding or other forms of support.

Women who are subjected to lesbian baiting often spend a great deal of time and energy trying to correct the image others have of them. They may change their behavior to exaggerate their "femininity," such as by being less assertive, discontinuing participation in "unfeminine" activities such as sports or outdoor activities, avoiding being in the presence of women who are open as lesbians, and making a point of being seen with boyfriends (Blinde & Taube, 1992). In extreme cases, women engage in deep self-hatred and self-destructive behavior when they are lesbian baited.

Taking Action Against Lesbian Baiting

Case #1

As she drove away from school, Louise remembered that she was going out to dinner with several good friends. After telling her story to her friends, Louise realized there were a number of options for how she could react. She considered wearing dresses and talking about a fictitious boyfriend or ignoring it and pretending it never happened. But she still wondered what the students thought of her and realized that both of these options would not address the attitudes of the girls. She decided to call her women friends who lead outdoor activities, to find out if this had ever happened to them and what they'd done. She could also talk to people and read more about women in nontraditional jobs, since part of what was behind this seemed to be the students' reactions to her leading outdoor activities and dressing differently than women were supposed to.

She thought about several things she could do at school the next day. Either she could just tell the students that it was not appropriate for them to call anyone names and that while "Lezzie" is used derogatorily, being a lesbian is not bad. She decided she definitely wanted to talk to the school guidance counselor who had been trying to organize a presentation by the local lesbian, gay, and bisexual speakers' bureau. And she began to consider whether she should plan some activities for the upcoming school Diversity Day on sexism and homophobia in order to help the students develop a broader sense of how women lead their lives and of the lives of lesbians.

As she considered each of these options, Louise realized that she needed to deal with the issue of the conservative, probably homophobic board. She wanted to learn more about how hostile the climate really was for anyone addressing homophobia and to find supportive coworkers.

Case #2

When Deb, one of the WOA Board members, heard about the meeting she had missed, she thought, "Here we go again, another women's organization being lesbian baited!" She had been in other organizations that had been baited, and had done some reading and talking with other women about how to address it. She knew a woman, Anne, who conducted training on issues affecting women, who had taught her a lot about the dynamics of lesbian baiting. Deb

called the Chair of the Board and asked to have Anne spend some time with the Board at the next meeting explaining how lesbian baiting worked and helping the Board figure out ways to respond effectively to the baiting.

After hearing Anne explain how lesbian baiting was used as a tool to keep women in gender roles and to support sexism, all of the Board members agreed that they did not want to do anything that supported sexism. Some of the members were still nervous about being called lesbian, but they agreed that maybe they needed to learn more about lesbians and homophobia in general and in their community. The Board agreed that they would continue to seek funding for their programs and continue with the same activities in their programs, and that at the next meeting, they would discuss ways to proactively address homophobia and sexism in the organization and community.

Lesbian baiting will exist as long as homophobia and sexism exist. Along with working against homophobia and sexism in general, individuals and groups can take a number of actions to combat lesbian baiting. In any situation where lesbian baiting has occurred, or has the potential of occurring, there is a whole range of possible responses. Some of the responses actually reinforce the lesbian baiting, while some responses combat it. If one is concerned about combating lesbian baiting, it is important to know the difference between actions that reinforce lesbian baiting and those that combat it. "Defending" oneself by asserting one's heterosexuality, modifying one's behavior to be more "feminine," and not challenging lesbian baiting "rumors" are all actions that reinforce lesbian baiting. Naming baiting for what it is, working against homophobia and sexism in general, and educating oneself about how gender roles limit women are all actions that combat lesbian baiting.

The key to taking action to prevent lesbian baiting and to respond to it when it occurs is to recognize it for what it is, a tool to keep women in line, and to recognize that it operates by drawing on the fear women have of being labeled lesbian. Lesbian baiting does not hold as much power if one is not afraid of being labeled lesbian. Suzanne Pharr (1988) describes this dynamic in the following way: "The word *lesbian* is instilled with the power to halt our work and control our lives. And we give it its power with our fear" (p. 25).

Have you ever experienced lesbian baiting? How did you react? What would you do if you were to be lesbian baited tomorrow? Have you ever spoken with other women who work in outdoor and adventure education about lesbian baiting or homophobia in general? I believe that these are important questions for all women who are outdoor and adventure educators to consider and discuss with other women. One of the major ways that homophobia works is through silence and invisibility. We can counter that silence by talking with other women about how lesbian baiting and other forms of homophobia work to restrict the lives of all women. As Suzanne Pharr (1988) states, lesbian baiting works because of our fear of being called lesbian and because of the existence of homophobia and sexism. In order to

effectively combat lesbian baiting, we need to both eliminate our own fear of being labeled lesbian, and to work to end homophobia and sexism in general.

How would you react if you were Louise and had just been called "Lezzie" by students? How would you react if you were a Board member of WOA and had just heard about the rumors about the organization? Louise and the WOA Board were taken by surprise when they were lesbian baited. We do not have to be taken by surprise. We can talk about lesbian baiting and work to prevent it as well as respond to it in a way that empowers women rather than contributes to women's disempowerment. We do not have a choice about whether or how we might be lesbian baited. However, we do have a choice in how we respond when it occurs.

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